

## **Healing Rays**

by Rev. Durrell Watkins

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

### THE PROCLAIMED WORD

I must confess with some sadness and regret this morning that I will not be singing you a song about a Yuletide Hippo, nor will I be sharing amusing anecdotes about the delightful dead divas who enjoy prominent places in my personal pantheon of show-biz goddesses. There will not even be a slightly exaggerated tale about my now long dead great-aunt Gladys. I can't spare the time...not even to tell you about when my Aunt Gladys took up oil painting...

She got so good, some of her pieces were featured in a gallery. One day she asked the gallery owner if any of the pieces were selling. The owner said, "Gladys, I have good news and bad news. The good news is a woman was just in here, saw your work and asked if I thought you were the sort of artist whose paintings would increase in value after you die. I said I believe you are good enough that when you die your work will skyrocket in value, and so she bought every piece in the gallery!" Aunt Gladys said, "So what's the bad news?" "Unfortunately, the woman is your doctor!"

But I don't have time to share those kinds of stories with you today, so I won't. Why isn't there time? Because the readings this morning are messy. They are difficult. Without some explanation, they don't really say much on their own. They come to us in an historical and cultural context and if we are not mindful of that context the readings have very little relevance for us.

First let me say two things about the readings – they are prophetic and they are apocalyptic. Prophecy is not prognostication...Prophecy is truth-telling, not fortune-telling. It is challenging corruption, not predicting a prescribed future.

And apocalyptic writings do tend to imagine the end of an age, but they also offer hope that the end will be followed by a new beginning, a fresh start. So, though the imagery of the texts at first glance may seem terrifying, the truth is they are balanced with a very real optimism.

The book of Malachi is the final text in what Christians have traditionally called the Old Testament. Malachi means "my messenger" and may not actually refer to a person's name. So, the book may actually be anonymously written rather than penned by someone named Malachi.

Malachi isn't a terribly long text, and it contains such familiar sayings as, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse...try me in this, says the God of hosts: shall I not open for you the floodgates of heaven to pour down blessing upon you without measure?" and, of course, the one we use around here quite a bit, our church motto, "For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings and you will go out dancing like calves released from the stall." Another translation makes it even clearer, "For you who [revere] my name, there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays; and you will gambol like calves out of the stall and tread down the wicked; they will become ashes under your feet on the day I take action, says the Lord of hosts."

After that interesting image, Malachi closes with these words of promise and warning, "Lo, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and terrible day..."

You will recall from the book of 2 Kings, Elijah ascends to heaven in a whirlwind. Malachi says that Elijah will return one day, apparently as a harbinger of doom, or of hope, or both.

Well, as far as I know, Elijah never made a return trip to this plane of existence. And the writer of Matthew's gospel noticed that too, so he has in his gospel Jesus not taking Malachi LITERALLY, but figuratively or symbolically, saying that the life and work of John the Baptizer was actually the

return or second coming of Elijah. So apparently Jesus, at least on occasion, was comfortable coming to non-literal conclusions about the scriptures.

In any case, we have a story of Elijah ascending to the heavens and an expectation that he will in some way return right before the “great and terrible day of the Lord,” that is, a day of final reckoning, and we later have that expectation being understood in a fairly creative and flexible way by the writer of Matthew’s gospel. But in the consciousness of first century faith communities, there is now a well established notion of God’s prophet being somehow brought up to be in God’s eternal presence (presumably, in the ancient mind, somewhere in the sky), from which the prophet may one day, in some fashion, return to bring about divine justice.

Some of the followers of Jesus, at least within a generation of his crucifixion, seem to take those old and familiar themes and re-energize them and reinterpret them and reapply them, as now stories start to evolve about Jesus somehow surviving his execution and ascending to be with God and promising to return one day to finally set things right in an unjust world. And isn’t that what we heard from Luke’s gospel this morning?

We’ve been in Luke’s gospel for almost a year now...and so we know that it is written in a turbulent time. And we know that in turbulent times in biblical history, and even since, people sometimes actually hoped that the world as they knew it would end and be replaced by something better. In fact, Luke’s gospel is written between 15 and 30 years after the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple . Jewish groups, including the Jesus Movement that would evolve into what we now call Christianity, are viewed increasingly with suspicion and disdain and are being persecuted by imperial powers.

The first century church has experienced the end of the world as they knew it and at least some of them honestly hope that God will set things right. They imagine that will happen by God toppling the powers that had cracked down on them, and the world of empire would be destroyed and a more equitable system would replace it.

For people who believed they had nothing to lose, the idea that Jesus might return to unleash divine wrath on those who hoarded and abused power was actually a very comforting idea. And so borrowing images from Isaiah and Ezekiel and Joel and Haggai and Daniel and Malachi, the writer of Luke’s gospel dares to dream of a day when oppressive powers will be overthrown and a better world will be established. That’s why, following his gruesome imagery of cosmic calamity, he can also say, “Lift your heads high, because redemption is on the way.”

The writer of Luke’s gospel, undoubtedly familiar with Malachi’s prophecy, is saying in his way what Malachi said so many years earlier, “there will arise the sun of justice with its healing rays; and you will dance like calves out of the stall...”

Luke is writing to a specific audience; we weren’t it, by the way. The person we are calling Luke is writing in his own time to his own people in the midst of very particular circumstances. And yet, the more particular we are, the more universal we seem to be. Pain, suffering, fear, loss, grief, oppression, injustice...those experiences didn’t end in the time of Luke. And so we feel his passion about hoping that difficult things will get better, and believing that they can, perhaps even in dramatic and possibly miraculous ways.

And so we continue showing reverence for the infinite Compassion and Life-giving Presence that we call “God.” We show reverence by speaking out against injustice, by trying to include more kinds of people, by trying to relieve suffering where we can, by supporting the vision of hope and healing and inclusion as we give generously of time, talent, and treasure to this amazing manifestation of faith we call Sunshine Cathedral.

Malachi’s imagery may not appeal to us. Luke’s imagery may not excite us, but we share their hope for a better, more just, and more inclusive world, and we share their commitment to

contributing to just such a world. What God does for us, God does through us, and so in our own way and in our own words, we remain committed to being the love of God in action. We remain committed to being Christ in our world. We remain committed to sharing the Healing Rays of indomitable hope. We remain committed to Sharing the Light with the World. Our commitment will help create a better kind of world.

This is the Good News. Amen.

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#### THE AFFIRMING WORD

Healing Rays touch my life now.  
The Light of Hope shines on my life now.  
The Light of Love shines on my life now.  
The Light of Wisdom shines on my life now.  
The Light of Christ shines through me.  
I live in the Light.  
I am sharing the Light with the World!  
And so it is.

#### THE FINAL WORD

“As we become purer channels for God's light, we develop an appetite for the sweetness that is possible in this world. A miracle worker is not geared toward fighting the world that is, but toward creating the world that could be.” – Marianne Williamson